

Community Eligibility Option Fact Sheet

Beginning in School Year 2014-15, schools serving high numbers of low-income children will be able to participate in the Community Eligibility option for reimbursement of meals served through the USDA National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. Community Eligibility allows schools with high numbers of low-income children to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting school meal applications. This option increases participation by children in the school meal programs, while schools reduce labor costs and increase their federal revenues, allowing for a healthier student body and a healthier school meal budget.

How it Works

- Schools in high-poverty areas provide free breakfasts and lunches to all students without collecting applications or tracking eligibility in the cafeteria.
- A formula based on the number of students certified without the need for paper applications (called “Identified Students”) is the basis for reimbursements instead of paper applications.
- Any school building can use this option when 40 percent or more students are certified for free meals without a paper application based on their status as in foster care, Head Start, homeless, migrant, or living in households that receive SNAP/Food Stamps, TANF cash assistance or FDPIR benefits.
- Districts may combine data from two or more schools to determine a combined percent of Identified Students.
- The reimbursement rate for both lunch and breakfast is determined by multiplying the percent of Identified Students by 1.6. The resulting number is the percent of meals reimbursed at the “free” reimbursement rate, with the rest being reimbursed at the “paid” rate. For example, a school with 50 percent Identified Students would be reimbursed at the free rate for 80 percent of the breakfasts and lunches it served ($50 \times 1.6 = 80$) and the remaining 20 percent would be reimbursed at the paid rate.
- Participating schools are guaranteed to receive the same reimbursement rate (or a higher one if the level of direct certification increases) for 4 years.
- “Community eligibility” is currently being offered in 11 states – and the early results show that it improves participation in the school meal programs. A new report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Food Research and Action Center found that in schools that have participated in community eligibility for two years, lunch participation increased by 13 percent and breakfast participation increased by 25 percent.

Benefits

- All students receive all meals at no charge.
- Paperwork for schools and families is dramatically reduced. Families no longer have to complete applications, and schools no longer have to certify individual student eligibility which also eliminates the verification process.
- School meal service is streamlined. School meal staff no longer collect payments or do individual student counting and claiming. They simply count total meals served and assure that each student only receives one meal at the point of service.
- Universal (free) meals make it easier for schools to implement alternative meal service such as “grab and go” and breakfast in the classroom.